



Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 109th CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

Vol. 151

WASHINGTON, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2005

No. 9

House of Representatives

STATEMENT OF CONGRESSMAN ED CASE OF HAWAII WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2005

STATE VETERANS CEMETERY FAIRNESS ACT OF 2005

Mr. Speaker, let me begin by completely embracing and endorsing the comments of the gentleman from California (Mr. Filner) earlier today in support of H.R. 302, a continuation of a long fight for justice for our Filipino veterans. I say, as the representative from the district out of 435 in our entire country containing and holding the largest number of Filipino Americans, this is exactly what we must do to bring justice and conclusion to this sorry story in our history.

But I rise here today to highlight another issue which goes as well to the very heart of our collective obligation to our Nation's veterans, whether they be members of our greatest generation, like Hawaii's own 100th Battalion and 442nd Regimental Combat Team, or those lost tragically in the deserts and streets of Iraq and Afghanistan, and that is our promise that our fallen be buried with their comrades in our great national cemeteries, be they Arlington or my own National Cemetery of the Pacific.

Despite this most elemental undertaking, increasing numbers of veterans are facing a dire situation. Currently, 11 States do not have a national cemetery operated by the Department of Veterans Affairs, and an additional six States, including Hawaii, have national cemeteries that no longer accept casket remains.

To assist with this indefensible shortfall, a number of States, including Hawaii, have worked with the VA to construct and operate State veterans cemeteries. Established in 1978 to comple-

ment the VA's National Cemetery Administration, the State Cemetery Grants Program assists States in providing grave sites for veterans in those areas where VA's national cemeteries cannot fully satisfy their burial needs. On most of the neighbor islands of Hawaii, my district, we have State cemeteries operated under this program.

Specifically, grants from the State Cemetery Grants Program may be used only for the purpose of establishing, expanding or improving veterans cemeteries that are owned and operated by a State or U.S. territory. Aid can be granted only to States or U.S. territories, not to private organizations, counties, cities or other government agencies.

VA can now provide up to 100 percent of the development cost for an approved project. For establishment of new cemeteries, VA can provide for operating equipment. VA cannot and does not provide for the acquisition of land so that the States are solely responsible for providing locations for such cemeteries.

State cemeteries operated and established under the grant program must conform to the standards and guidelines pertaining to site selection, planning and construction set forth by VA. Cemeteries must be operated solely for the burial of service members who die on active duty, veterans and their eligible spouses and dependent children.

Any cemetery assisted by a VA grant must be maintained and operated according to the operational standards and measures of the National Cemetery Administration. After construction, the administration, operation and maintenance of a State's veterans cemetery is solely the responsibility of the State government, and the National Cemetery Administration has no further financial obligation to the State for the burial of veterans, with one important exception, which is the nub of this speech.

Currently, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs is authorized to pay a plot or interment allowance up to \$300 per burial to a State for expenses incurred by the State for the burial of eligible veterans in a cemetery owned and operated by the State if the burial is performed at no cost to the veteran's next of kin. This benefit is administered by the Veterans Benefit Administration, and the State must apply to VBA to receive it. A great program, a great supplement to the assistance by our States of the national obligations to our veterans.

But despite the \$300 currently provided to State governments for each veteran buried in a State veterans cemetery, the true cost is as much as \$750 per burial and rising. Thus, even with the partial reimbursements provided by the VA, State governments with no available Federal cemeteries pay millions of dollars to fulfill our Federal commitment to provide a final resting place for our veterans.

This shortfall is particularly painful during the current budget difficulties faced by many States across our Nation and has the inevitable result, as it has in Hawaii, of inexcusable shortfalls in available State veterans cemeteries, both in burial plot availability and especially in operation and maintenance of existing facilities. This is certainly again the case in Hawaii which operates several State veterans cemeteries through VBA assistance that are stretched way beyond their means. I could go down the list, but the one that comes to mind most quickly is the West Hawaii Veterans Cemetery on my home island of Hawaii.

The bill I introduce today proposes a simple modification in an otherwise solid Federal program, to raise the Federal reimbursement for veteran burials in State cemeteries where there is no Federal VA option from \$300 to \$750 per burial. The price, a minimal \$5 million annually as priced last year by the CBO. This is fair and necessary and will enable us to fulfill this most basic obligation. I ask for my colleagues' support.

Mahalo.